

Literature in the Language of Life:
The Importance of Writing in Colloquial Moroccan Arabic

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Abstract

Gender inequities and rampant illiteracy create significant obstacles to progress in Morocco. Can feminist literature solve these social problems? In this Capstone, I examine three major works and two short stories by Moroccan author Leila Abouzeid. She writes in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), an elite and formal language that requires extensive education to obtain fluency. Critics have analyzed and praised her decision to use Arabic rather than French, the language of the colonizer, but considering the wide divergences between colloquial Moroccan Arabic and MSA, I propose that Abouzeid translate her work into the Moroccan dialect. The accessibility and relevance of such literature might motivate illiterate women to learn to read. In addition to promoting feminist ideals within an Islamic context among women who would most benefit from such an outlook, revolutionizing Arabic literature by writing in the colloquial dialect could begin to combat illiteracy throughout the Arab world.

Introduction

Language choice is a common dilemma for post-colonial authors who wish to assert independence by writing in the national language rather than that of the colonizer.

Morocco, along with other Arab countries, faces a unique problem in that its “native” national language is an elite language that is solely written and requires extensive education to learn.

Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) differs significantly from the colloquial Arabic of everyday life in its vocabulary and grammatical structures, and no one speaks MSA natively (Maier 260). One critic goes so far as to refer to MSA as a “foreign language” along with French (Diaconoff 8).

Such a distinction may be a stretch because similarities in sounds and vocabulary do exist, but MSA remains at a high register that is never used in daily speech. Speaking in MSA would be

comparable to speaking in Shakespearean English, but nonetheless MSA is used “for all language functions based on written texts, such as those of government and administration, law

and commerce, education, the media and literature” (Hall 68). Morocco’s situation is

particularly challenging because Moroccan Arabic is “considered the most deviant version of Standard Arabic” (Sadiqi *Women* 48). Therefore, the language of literature diverges widely from the language of everyday life.

Morocco is also unique in that literary authors generally choose French over MSA (Fernea xix). The interest in wider dissemination of one’s work to the western world often drives this decision. Therefore, authors traditionally choose between wider publication in the language of the colonizer and more limited publication in MSA, a “native” but elite language. Leila Abouzeid, a female author whose work conveys feminist themes, selects the latter as “a form of national assertion” (Vinson 94).

Abouzeid was born in 1950 in el-Ksiba, a Middle Atlas village, to a middle-class family (Fernea xx). She was among the few women who received a good education thanks to the efforts of male Moroccan nationalists who demanded education and job opportunities for women following independence from France (Khannous 175). Her novel *Year of the Elephant* was originally published in Arabic in 1983. It originally appeared in episodes in a newspaper in the capital city of Rabat, and was published in its full form in 1984 in Morocco (Abouzeid Preface xvii). In 1989, this novel became the first by a Moroccan woman to be translated from Arabic into English (Fernea xix). Her memoir *Return to Childhood* (Arabic version 1993 in Rabat, Morocco; English version 1998) and the novel *The Last Chapter* (Arabic and English versions 2000) were also written in MSA and later translated into English. She also translated and published a collection of short stories in 2005 as an addition to those included as an appendix to *Year of the Elephant*. Abouzeid performed the full translation of her memoir and short stories, and assisted with the translation of *The Last Chapter*.

Several critics have noted, analyzed, and praised Abouzeid's decision to write in Arabic rather than French. They commend her for choosing the more "authentic" language of her people and resisting colonial influence. However, none have examined the potential problems with writing in MSA rather than in colloquial Moroccan Arabic. The biggest of these complications is the fact that the use of MSA is confined to spheres of the educated. The Moroccan women who would benefit most from her work are those with limited or no education, and therefore her work is inaccessible to them. Furthermore, MSA is the language of the government that imposes the gender inequities against which her novels revolt. Therefore, I propose that Abouzeid implement the literary strategy of translating her published work into colloquial Moroccan Arabic.

Writing literature in colloquial Arabic would be revolutionary and would likely face resistance. If successful, however, such a movement could begin to eradicate the major problem of illiteracy in Morocco. In addition to reaching women with limited education, a novel written in colloquial Arabic would provide illiterate Moroccans with a more accessible option that could both motivate and assist their efforts toward literacy. Of all Moroccan authors, Abouzeid would be most capable of initiating such a movement. When she published *Year of the Elephant* in 1983, most authors favored French over Arabic. Today, Arabic is a common choice for authors. Therefore, she could initiate the use of colloquial Moroccan Arabic in the same way that she revolutionized Moroccan literature by writing in MSA rather than French. Abouzeid is established and respected enough to take the risk of writing literature in the language of everyday speech.

The significant differences between the language of everyday life and the language learned in school create a major obstacle to literacy. Learning to read is significantly more difficult when the language one reads is not that same language one hears at home. This task would be comparable to an American who only hears English at home trying to read in Spanish. She would be able to read the letters and sound out the words, but the differences in vocabulary would prevent comprehension. The impediment of such differences between MSA and colloquial Moroccan Arabic is clear when we consider the shocking illiteracy rates in Morocco. 47.8% of Moroccans are illiterate, and among the female population, 60.4% are illiterate according to the 2004 census ("Morocco"). Even more shocking is the fact that 90% of rural women are illiterate. While limited access to good schools contributes to this problem, illiteracy is largely a cyclical problem. Women who are illiterate cannot read to or help their children with schoolwork, meaning that the MSA students learn in school cannot be reinforced at home.

Mohamed Maamouri, associate director of the International Literacy Institute at the University of Pennsylvania, recognizes such a problem with Arabic education and proposes the following solution:

Because of the high rates of illiteracy among the older Arab generations, a strategy of reading activism in colloquial Arabic becomes highly advisable. A headstart-type [sic] program in colloquial Arabic would undoubtedly benefit both Arab children and their parents. Storybooks in colloquial Arabic could be used in an intergenerational approach to Arabic first literacy acquisition. These books constitute an easy and accelerated access to reading skills by illiterate or low literate Arab parents (mostly mothers) who could then use their newly acquired skills to significantly enhance the cognitive awakening of their children. (61)

A translation of Abouzeid's work into colloquial Arabic would be an important intermediate step between the proposed storybooks and the literature currently available in MSA. Not only would such translations provide an interesting and stimulating option for less educated Moroccans looking to improve their reading skills, but Abouzeid's work in colloquial Moroccan Arabic would allow women who face gender inequities to read literature that "performs the indispensable task of presenting to the Moroccan woman reader characters with whom she can identify" (Lane 270).

Critic Rita Felski identifies recognition as one of four uses of literature. She argues that when we recognize ourselves in a book, the work becomes more meaningful and engaging (14, 23). Abouzeid's characters already offer an opportunity for women readers to recognize themselves in the texts, but a translation into colloquial Moroccan Arabic would allow for recognition on the level of language as well. Abouzeid's characters also provide readers with a

positive role model in the search for women's rights and independence. Furthermore, by demonstrating the possibility of self-expression in the public sphere, a translation could encourage women to speak out against oppression on their own. By providing a means to combat women's illiteracy, a translation of Abouzeid's work could enable, as well as encourage, women to speak out against gender inequity in the public sphere. In the preface to the first edition of *Year of the Elephant*, Abouzeid notes, "Morocco is full of untold stories. Often, I have looked at faces in the streets and said to myself: If they could write, what wonderful stories they could tell" (xviii). Translating her work into colloquial Moroccan Arabic could act as the first step toward enabling these women to tell their stories.

While Abouzeid claims to be reaching Moroccans in their national language, she is actually better known in English speaking countries than she is in the Arab literary world (Maier 262). Her characters are women from a variety of social classes who seek independence and equity in a country with patriarchal laws and traditions. Such individuals are important for Moroccan readers to see in order to reveal or remind them of the difficulties women encounter. Therefore, the fact that she is more widely read in English-speaking countries than her own suggests a problem.

Suellen Diaconoff spent time researching in Morocco and discovered a nationwide aversion to reading for pleasure. A twenty-eight-year-old Arabic teacher with four years of university education told her, "Most people don't want to read; they are not encouraged to read, and in fact our educational system turns us off reading. In school, we are so stuffed full of books that have to be memorized that we don't want to have anything more to do with books" (26). Her response was one that Diaconoff heard from many Moroccans, and would likely contribute to the problem of Abouzeid's work receiving insufficient recognition in the Arab literary world.

A translation of her novels into colloquial Arabic could make them more appealing in the sense that they would no longer be reminiscent of the rote memorization required in school because the work would be in the language of everyday life.

In her memoir, *Return to Childhood*, Abouzeid remembers an excellent teacher she had who defied the Moroccan pedagogical traditions of being “haughty and severe” and emphasizing rote memorization (85). Traditionally, Moroccan students must learn to regurgitate:

’So-and-so says...,’ ’So-and-so thinks...,’ ’So-and-so interprets...’ Thus the student must read the text through the opinions of all those so-and-so’s rather than from his or her own point of view. Students are expected to open their eyes and ears and shut their mouths. (85)

In contrast, Abouzeid’s teacher Professor Alaoui encouraged them to express their own ideas and opinions. The deterrence of critical thinking in Moroccan schools likely causes the perpetuation of social inequities. If students learn not to question opinions at a young age, they will be likely to willingly accept the status quo even if injustices exist. An emphasis on memorization rather than expression of opinions would also make school much less enjoyable, a fact that likely prompts students to drop out. If a girl does not enjoy school, she would not be motivated to work against traditional gender inequities. By emphasizing Abouzeid’s success as a result of the critical thinking approach, she suggests a restructuring of traditional pedagogy. Furthermore, if less educated Moroccans could read the memoir in colloquial Moroccan Arabic, they would be able to engage in the act of critical thought. Abouzeid’s work does not blatantly spell out ideological ideas or instruction, so each reader needs to interact with the texts in such a way to make them personally meaningful. Although Abouzeid does not explicitly dictate

the necessity of women's education, she does imply this idea by discussing her own academic experience in light of her success as an author.

The shift away from memorization to critical thinking is an essential way for literature to enact social change. Abouzeid's work does not provide explicit ideological instruction for improving women's rights in Morocco, but instead reveals pervasive themes that cause and perpetuate such problems. Therefore, a reader must think critically in order to get the most out of her work, a process that, once learned, can be applied to everyday life in order to rectify social problems. Writing in colloquial Moroccan Arabic would be a departure from the traditional books that must be memorized in school, and therefore could provide the necessary separation for readers to critically analyze Abouzeid's thematic messages.

Abouzeid recognizes that Moroccan women have not widely acknowledged her work. In the Afterword to *The Last Chapter*, she states:

Before long I was asked, 'What do Moroccan women think of the book?' In fact, there had been very little commentary from women, save from my circle of relatives who described the book as 'beautiful.' Women in my culture tend to keep what they think to themselves as a matter of course. As for me, perhaps I had succumbed to the stereotype that women don't speak because they don't think. (157)

While cultural norms do in fact dictate that women keep their opinions to themselves, such an assessment may not capture the full reason that few women had commented on her work.

Abouzeid overlooks the possibility that few women had expressed their opinions about her work because few women can read in MSA. Knowing that over half of Morocco's women are illiterate, it is clear that a very small portion of Moroccan women are capable of reading

Abouzeid's novels. Furthermore, a woman who is functionally literate according to a nationwide census would likely struggle with a work of literature written in MSA, just as someone who is literate enough in English to simply read and write has difficulty reading Shakespeare or Milton.

Abouzeid does see the value of colloquial Arabic in writing, however, as she uses a combination of MSA and colloquial in her work. The bulk of her narratives are written in MSA, but the dialogue is written in a "modified vernacular" (Fernea xxx). She also makes use of the dialect in her memoir to mark moments in which her mother and grandmother tell oral narratives. Therefore, she clearly has the ability to write in a language that is not traditionally written. A translation into colloquial Arabic would allow her to further carry out her intentions in being an author. She states, "When I write I talk to my people. I use their idioms, their specific expressions that are linked to their inner self and deep feelings. I write for my people and have to do it in their language" (Hall 71). Idioms and expressions as she refers to them cannot exist in a language that is not spoken, so her attempts to include them would be much more effective if she were writing her entire works in the spoken dialect.

Examples of women's oppression in Morocco

The primary source of gender inequity in Morocco is the Family Code. Established shortly after independence in 1957, the Family Code insists upon one sole interpretation of *shar'iah*, or Islamic law. Such a codification of one particular understanding goes against the tradition of *ijtihad*, which welcomes multiple interpretations and opinions. The Family Code introduced "crippling laws [that] did not reflect the spirit of Islam and were in reality a product of the new secular modern state" (Khannous 177). Threats to gender equality legalized by the 1957 Family Code requiring the consent of a male "tutor" in order for a woman to get married, allowing only men to initiate divorce, and allowing women to marry at the age of 15 (Zoglin

966, 971, 972). Furthermore, the Code defined the family as “a union for procreation under the leadership of the husband” (Eddouada 15). Such a definition essentially gives men full power over their families.

In 2004, the Family Code underwent important symbolic reforms, but women’s overall equality saw little improvement. While the reform raises the marriage age to 18 and gives women more rights in issues of marriage and divorce, many of the changes give judges power to override any of the stipulations if the situation warrants it. Therefore, some judges still use the philosophy of the old Family Code to interpret the 2004 reforms. Girls are still getting married under the age of 18 at an alarming rate because the judge has the power to determine exceptions to the law in particular circumstances. In addition to the judges’ power to interpret the law, a major obstacle the reform faces is the fact that many women are unaware that any changes were made (Eddouada “Intervju”). This lack of awareness is likely a result of the rampant illiteracy among Moroccan women.

Illiteracy and limited education are other sources of women’s oppression in Morocco. Even though nationalist movements emphasized the importance of educating women and allowed women such as Abouzeid to obtain autonomy through education, adult men are still much more likely than women to be literate (Maier 260). The fight for women’s education was overshadowed during colonialism by the efforts to improve schools in general. In 1955, only forty Moroccans graduated from university, and none were female. At that time only six girls had graduated from high school (Fernea xxviii). Although women’s education has vastly improved, 60.4% of Moroccan women were illiterate as of 2004 (“Morocco”). We must approach even this number with skepticism. As previously mentioned, qualifying as literate in a census does not necessarily satisfy the requisite reading level to effectively participate as an

independent member of the public sphere. Although women have had the right to vote since the establishment of the constitution in 1956, such a right is illusory because one requires a certain level of education in order to adequately exercise it.

Morocco has the highest rate of female illiteracy in the Maghreb.¹ Considering that the colloquial dialects in the Maghreb are the farthest from MSA, with Morocco's dialect being the most disparate, strategies to improve women's literacy should be focused on Morocco. Therefore, translating Abouzeid's work into colloquial Moroccan Arabic would be an important first step toward fighting illiteracy and motivating the fight against the Family Code in favor of women's equality.

Abouzeid's decision to write in Arabic

In a multilingual country such as Morocco, authors have more options when choosing which language to write in. Personal and political factors play in to such a decision, and Abouzeid's reasons for selecting Arabic involve both. In her afterword to *The Last Chapter*, she states that dating back to the fourth grade she "loathed reading in French and developed an aversion to using it outside the classroom" (153). Her personal distaste for the language was further entrenched by the political atmosphere in Morocco following independence from France. Writing in French would mean writing in the foreign language of the colonizers. Abouzeid explains in an interview: "when a Moroccan writes in French, he writes for France and he must comply with what it understands and what pleases it. He must maintain its preconceived images about Moroccans" (Hall 70). Furthermore, French was the language of domination, a characteristic that does not fit with her theme of women's independence (Khannous 176).

¹ The female illiteracy rate in Tunisia is 23%; 40% in Algeria; 50% in Mauritania; 19% in Libya; compared to 60.4% in Morocco

Therefore, by writing in Arabic Abouzeid claims independence from an oppressive power and allows herself to write as she wishes.

Considering such a rationale, her use of MSA becomes illogical. It seems arbitrary to distinguish between a foreign oppressor and a domestic one. Therefore, if she chooses not to write in French on the basis of resisting the language of the oppressive colonial power, using the same logic she should reject MSA because it is the language of the Moroccan government and administration that oppresses women.

The necessity of a translation into Moroccan Arabic

By translating her work into colloquial Moroccan Arabic, Abouzeid could provide less educated women with an example of public self-expression opposing gender inequities in the language of daily life. The obvious objection to such a proposition is that the women who would benefit most from reform are entirely illiterate, so a novel written in the Moroccan dialect would be no more comprehensible than a work written in MSA. One could become literate in the dialect much more easily than in MSA because of the phonetic nature of Arabic. One would only need to learn to read the alphabet and could then begin to recognize words used in everyday speech if a novel were to be written in the dialect, whereas in MSA there are variations in vocabulary and syntax that require a greater command of the language. MSA has a larger vocabulary and more complicated grammatical structures that make it more difficult to learn. Therefore, although illiterate women would still need to learn to read in order to understand Abouzeid's work, the task would be simpler than obtaining literacy in MSA.

Although the proposal to translate Arabic literature into the colloquial dialect is not entirely new, the scope of the potential benefits has not been fully considered. In the introduction to *The Anchor Book of Modern Arabic Fiction*, editor Denys Johnson-Davies notes

that he proposed the idea of writing in the dialect to Egyptian author Naguib Mahfouz, but Mahfouz emphasizes “the advantages of a text that could be read from one end of the Arab world to the other” (xiv). Both Johnson-Davies and Mahfouz, however, ignore the problems with illiteracy and the difficulty in learning to read a language that is not spoken. Maamouri, on the other hand, considers this issue:

It would make the learning of the decoding skills easier by connecting the letters of the Arabic orthographic system to known and more accessible language patterns and forms. The process of Arabic reading becomes relatively easy because it is based on the learner’s dialect. (60)

His proposal focuses mostly on reading acquisition in pre-school students, but does briefly mention the use of such a tactic in promoting adult literacy. Maamouri neglects the possibility that women would be motivated to read if books that related to their lives were written in the spoken language of their everyday lives. The opportunity for a connection between the life of the reader and the lives of the characters presents Abouzeid’s fiction as an ideal body of work with which to carry out the translation. Although translating Abouzeid’s work into colloquial Moroccan Arabic could contribute a potential solution to the rampant illiteracy and aversion to reading among Moroccan women, such a move cannot be made without facing challenges.

As John Maier points out, “Becoming literate in Modern Standard Arabic is difficult, and the tendency is still strong to display it [literacy in MSA]. To veer off into the vernacular is still risky, certainly riskier than an English author’s veering off into non-Standard English” (Maier 259). Therefore, Abouzeid would be taking a big risk by translating her work into Moroccan Arabic. She may see such a move as a step backward from her place as an educated woman.

She could view the use of the colloquial Arabic in literature to be déclassé. The risk is lessened, however, if she continues to publish a first edition in MSA. In this fashion, she would still demonstrate her education and obtain the respect of the male elite population. By translating the work into Moroccan Arabic, she would enable the less educated portion of the Moroccan population to read her work. The presence of a novel that would be easier to understand and relatable could motivate illiterate Moroccans to learn to read.

If Abouzeid were to write in Moroccan Arabic, a new movement of colloquial literature could emerge that would provide intellectual stimulation for lower class Moroccans as well as those who are educated but could potentially prefer to read in the language they speak on a daily basis. As it is now, Moroccan Arabic is rarely written, but tradition is the only reason it remains isolated to oral expression. Along with the portions of oral narratives in her memoir, the magazine *Nichane* had already taken the revolutionary step of using a written form of Moroccan Arabic (Thorne par. 12-13). Although the magazine was shut down in October 2010 because of its progressive slant and controversial content, its existence and success as Morocco's best-selling Arabic weekly publication proves the feasibility of texts written in the Moroccan dialect. Similarly, *The Little Prince* was translated in 1997 into Tunisian Arabic, a dialect that also diverges from MSA (Maamouri 62). Therefore, although Arabic dialects are traditionally oral, it is not out of the question to use them as written languages.

Merits of MSA

Regardless of the rational problems with writing in MSA as the language of domestic oppression, there are practical reasons that justify Abouzeid writing the first edition of her novels in MSA. The most practical reason is that she was formally educated in MSA and it is the national written language. Therefore, Abouzeid is accustomed to writing in MSA rather than

colloquial Arabic and likely feels more comfortable with such a task. Furthermore, as a female author, Abouzeid already faces a number of barriers to publication based on traditional conceptions of the proper domestic role of women. As Abouzeid states in the Preface to her memoir *Return to Childhood*, “women in [her] culture do not speak in public” (iv). As a journalist, she wrote her first article under a male pseudonym in order to ensure its publication. According to Abouzeid, “Being a woman writing in Morocco is not an overwhelming problem, so long as one can convince the male intellectual institution of the value of one’s work” (Afterword 162). This caveat is a challenge in itself, and her use of MSA provides a potential solution.

Fatima Sadiqi, a scholar who has done extensive work on the linguistic situation in Morocco, notes: “It was through the use of MSA and French that Moroccan women made their first entrance in the public sphere right after independence” (*Language* 147). Colloquial Moroccan Arabic is the language of the private sphere whereas MSA is the language of the public sphere. The distinctions between public and private in Morocco are strongly delineated, with women being traditionally confined to the private sphere. Therefore by extension, Moroccan Arabic is a feminine language while MSA is masculine. Sadiqi points out:

MSA is part and parcel of masculine identity, hence its use in men-related domains...Moroccan men in general do not display positive attitudes towards women that are proficient in MSA...because proficiency in MSA symbolizes cultural identity and power and, hence, is more threatening to the established male-biased status quo. (*Language* 160)

By writing in MSA, Abouzeid defies traditional gender roles and subverts notions of masculine power and identity.

Although men may be wary of Abouzeid's command of MSA as a potential threat to masculine power and dominance, in the literary world, her use of MSA conforms to linguistic traditions. In all Arab countries, the colloquial version is used primarily for oral communication while MSA is used "for all language functions based on written texts, such as those of government and administration, law and commerce, education, the media and literature" (Hall 68). Furthermore, "MSA is the literary lingua franca in more than twenty nations of the modern Arab world" (Hall 68). Therefore, by writing in MSA, Abouzeid observes literary traditions that likely need to be followed in order to obtain the necessary respect within the Arab literary community. MSA also permits the dissemination of her work throughout the Arab world where similar issues of gender inequality exist.

In addition to the practical matter of needing to earn enough respect to be published, Abouzeid's decision to write in MSA allows the elite and educated population to read her work in a language that is closer to their native tongue than French. The educated and elite audience is an important one when Abouzeid's work demonstrates the need for political change. In a male dominated society such as Morocco, "Women's academic achievements and associations need to use the languages of institutions in order to make their voices heard in the decision-making spheres" (Sadiqi *Language* 147). The elite audience is the one that could potentially make or reform laws to enact the necessary change, so writing in a language they respect is important.

Morocco's oral traditions

Currently the only literature in colloquial Moroccan Arabic is oral, and includes storytelling and sung poetry. Oral literature holds a complicated status in Morocco. Sadiqi outlines some complexities of the form's status: "Oral literature is seen as the most authentic and un-Westernized type of literature in Morocco although up to recent times, written literature

was considered the only prestigious ‘literary’ form” (*Women* 43). Therefore, although the oral tradition was seen as authentic and important, educated Moroccans did not consider it to be “prestigious” literature until it was written. Furthermore, oral literature is associated with the feminine private sphere. Sadiqi notes: “Moroccan society assigns the role of guarding oral literature to women” and “they use oral literature to express their inner selves” (Sadiqi *Women* 44). Interestingly, women are barred from public storytelling such as that which occurs in Jemaa el Fna in Marrakesh (Simons par. 10). Therefore, two spheres of oral literature exist in Morocco – the masculine public sphere and the feminine private sphere. This dichotomy fits with the primary structure of Moroccan society as a whole, with the masculine version receiving far more respect. Women are responsible for passing down oral tradition within the private sphere of the home, but an attempt to do so in public would not be considered appropriate.

Abouzeid seeks to publicize and legitimize some of this oral literature in her memoir, *Return to Childhood*. She attempts to record the oral narratives of her mother and grandmother, and does so by mixing Moroccan Arabic into the MSA of the overall narrative. Diya Abdo, who performed detailed work on the changes that Abouzeid made in her translation of the work into English, notes that the English version of her memoir downplays the elements of oral tradition present in the original (27). While she considers such recognition of the oral tradition to be important, she cites a Moroccan critic who found nearly incomprehensible her use of Moroccan Arabic to signal the oral narratives of her family to render the work. Jameel Hamdawi believes that Moroccan Arabic is so “overused that the reader cannot bear it. It so often produces an ambiguity and vagueness which place the reader of this colloquial novel in a state of total confusion and constant aversion, unable to continue reading” (Abdo 29). The mixture of MSA and Moroccan Arabic likely causes most of this confusion. Furthermore, a combination of MSA

and the dialect limits the author's audience to include only educated Moroccans. Because of the major discrepancies between MSA and the Moroccan dialect, a reader from another Arab country would struggle to read her work. Although a translation into the dialect would not amend this limiting characteristic, it may allow her to feel more comfortable writing entirely in MSA for a first edition because the language of her people would still be portrayed in her translations. While Hamdawi was turned off by her extensive use of dialect, a Moroccan reader could adapt to its written form if it were used in the entire book. This critic's complaint also stems from Hamdawi's perspective, as a male critic who expects the traditional literary practice of writing in MSA to be maintained and likely does not appreciate this type of rebellion from a female author. Abouzeid would face similar criticism if she were to make the revolutionary decision of translating her entire books into colloquial Arabic.

Hamdawi does credit her use of the dialect for its ability to "convey the female being's environment in its inner and outer struggles and to convey the feminine world in its spontaneity, illiteracy, innateness, and reality" (Adbo 29). Regardless of his condescending terms of "illiteracy" and "innateness," he does capture the dialect's ability to portray an "authentic" Moroccan woman's experience. If Abouzeid were to use the dialect in all her work, it would better convey the oral quality of each novel and effectively portray the perspective of Moroccan women of a variety of social classes.

Abouzeid also seeks to legitimize the oral history of Morocco that is primarily the history of women. Their role in the fight for independence is largely overlooked in the dominant national history. In *Year of the Elephant*, Abouzeid amends the dominant history by putting women's oral histories into a written format. She rejects existing written histories and relies on oral testimony in finding content for her novel (Kozma "Remembrance" 389). Liat Kozma

analyzes Abouzeid's aims in writing *Year of the Elephant*: "Abouzeid believes that she needs to write, or translate this oral history into a literary form in order to empower and influence women's lives and political life in her country and to challenge the prevalent discourse on national history" ("Remembrance" 403). Considering this mission, MSA seems like a logical choice because she is trying to revise the dominant national history. Therefore, the language of formal education is appropriate in attempting to reteach history.

Although MSA is logical in regard to the aim of re-education, a translation into Moroccan Arabic would also be useful. A common theme of Abouzeid's work is a kind of amnesia in which female characters forget elements of their worth. For example, Zahra had forgotten that she knew how to spin wool until she was in a position of complete desperation. In the same regard, Moroccan women may be neglecting the importance of their role in shaping history and would need to be reminded by reading a book such as *Year of the Elephant*. If it were written in colloquial Arabic, less educated women could read the corrected history and realize their own value to society. Furthermore, by translating this novel into Moroccan Arabic, she would be maintaining the authenticity of women's oral history while simultaneously legitimizing and recording the often-overlooked history of women in the fight for independence.

A translation into colloquial Moroccan Arabic would still be limited to those Moroccans who possess some level of reading ability. Interestingly, the Arabic service of the BBC broadcast some of Abouzeid's short stories (Harlow xviii). If Abouzeid were to translate these stories into Moroccan Arabic, they could be broadcast in the same way and effectively create a modern version of oral literature. Those Moroccans with absolutely no education would understand the literature because it would be spoken in their true native language. Therefore, a

translation into colloquial Arabic is the first step to widespread dissemination of these important works to all Moroccans.

Abouzeid as a “feminist”

It is important to note that many “Moroccans equate “feminism” with an essentialized notion of “Western feminism” which is perceived to be part of a larger Western imperial project” (Abdo 23). Therefore, acts of feminism in Morocco do not share the same values as Western feminism. Abouzeid fits into a category known as Islamic Feminism, a movement that seeks to reconcile Islam with women’s rights and equality. Miriam Cooke terms this a “faith position” (59). Women who fall into such a movement insist that Islam in its foundations considers both sexes to be equal and that political factors and “distorted interpretations of what fidelity to religion entails” have resulted in misinterpretations of the Koran that establish a subordinate role for women (Hunter 144, 150). Interpretations of Islam are known as *ijtihad*. Abouzeid seeks to reform such interpretations along with the national history to reconcile women’s rights with her faith and religion (Khannous 188).

Abouzeid’s most recent novel, *The Last Chapter*, reveals men’s hypocrisy and their misinterpretations of Islam. In the book’s final chapter, the main character Aisha’s classmate sees her on television and envies her life, to which the classmate’s husband responds: “‘A woman’s kingdom is her home,’ he muttered. ‘I’ll bet you anything she’s dying to exchange that nonsense for a husband. A woman should learn just enough to raise her children and say her prayers. And that’s more than enough!’” (133). His idea that women should only learn enough to pray and raise children goes against the principles of Islam. The classmate remembers, however, that the prophet dictated, “Seeking knowledge is the religious duty of every Muslim man and woman” (133). Therefore, the classmate rejects the opinion that women should only be

learning enough to be a housewife and reconciles her idea with the teachings of Islam. Furthermore, as we have already seen, the problem of illiteracy would be much less severe if women could read to their children at a young age. Following this logic, learning “just enough to raise her children” would mean becoming literate, a step this woman’s husband likely sees as unnecessary. This moment reveals the possibility that men have misinterpreted Islam to keep women uneducated and in an inferior position.

Although Abouzeid originally rejected being defined as a feminist altogether, she has come to accept such a classification after becoming more familiar with feminist theory. She notes the following in her afterword to *The Last Chapter*:

Both *Year of the Elephant* and *Return to Childhood* have been subjected to post-colonial or feminist readings. I used to accept the first more readily than the second. ‘Women’s writing’ struck me as a limiting and even derogatory classification. However, as I became better acquainted with the theory of feminist criticism, I discovered, to my surprise, that it seemed entirely applicable to my writing. (160)

Regardless of the specific definitional restrictions of feminism, Abouzeid’s work undeniably falls under the broad scope of feminism in that it reveals gender inequities in hopes of improving the status of women.

She rejected feminism initially because of its perceived status as a Western import along with secular principles (Hunter 143). The content of her work, in which women of all class and education levels suffer inequities, however, makes the classification difficult to ignore. One critic notes that Abouzeid uses “marginal female social figures as a critical device to expose social flaws, hypocrisy, vice, institutionalized violence against women, as well as social injustice

toward them” (Babana-Hampton 39). Such a tactic fits under the umbrella of feminism. Furthermore, the feminist concept of gender equality is not merely a Western import because Islamic feminists claim that such a principle is a basic fundamental of the Koran (Hunter 144). Abouzeid insists “that she is not a feminist in the Western sense because of her conviction that Islam embodies equal gender rights and freedoms for women” (Khannous 178). Therefore, Abouzeid can be read through a feminist lens as long as one recognizes her status as a devout Muslim woman who “has been, from the start, unwavering in her reliance on Islam as a framework for women’s rights in Morocco” (Abdo 23-24).

In addition to the feminist themes of Abouzeid’s work, writing in the “feminine” language of the private sphere would be an act of rebellion in itself. Moving colloquial Moroccan Arabic into the public sphere would be an act of defiance against the hegemonic norms of the masculine status quo. By refusing to submit to the literary traditions that men established, Abouzeid could create a new and powerful women’s movement within Arabic literature. Revolutionizing Arabic literature to include work written in colloquial dialects could also facilitate entrance of more female authors. Considering the weak status of women’s education, the expectation that literature must be written in a language that requires extensive schooling to obtain fluency creates a barrier for women with less education who want to voice their perspective. If an established author such as Abouzeid were to establish the precedent for literature in colloquial Arabic, the literary world could become more open to other women’s literature. Translating Abouzeid’s work into colloquial Moroccan Arabic would be an important first step toward gender equity in the literary world and Moroccan society as a whole.

Aesthetic Concerns

While this paper primarily addresses the practical uses of a translation of Abouzeid's work, it is important to keep in mind that her primary intention is to create works of art. Therefore, her decisions about language cannot be criticized without recognizing her role as an artist. In the afterword to *The Last Chapter*, she notes that when writing *Year of the Elephant*, she "endeavored to drop every word that did not serve some purpose. This explains the book's conciseness and why some Moroccan reviewers have compared it with modern poetry" (156). MSA lends itself well to an aesthetic interest in concision and minimalism. The subject of a sentence in Arabic is built into the verb, so pronouns are largely unnecessary. Additionally, there is no verb for the present tense of "to be." In order to say "I am happy" in Arabic, one need simply say "*Ana said*," literally "I happy." Furthermore, structures of possession are built into nouns using suffixes instead of pronouns. The fact that MSA requires fewer words in its grammatical structures makes the language more suitable than French or English to Abouzeid's aesthetic style.

Although such aesthetic interests justify the use of MSA over a Western language, Moroccan Arabic maintains these same structures that would lend itself to a minimalist aesthetic. Therefore, most of the artistic value of her work would be maintained in a translation to Moroccan Arabic. The only elements that would really be sacrificed are the shifts in voice in *Return to Childhood* that result from a combination of MSA and Moroccan Arabic. One critic credits "the original Arabic's more chaotic, less coherent, and more oral nature," saying that "The Arabic version is rather a flowing narrative, less personal and more communal" (Abdo 26). While this response compares the original Arabic version to the English translation, similar sacrifices would be made with a uniform translation into the dialect. Regardless of this sacrifice, the oral origins of the dialect would likely override this loss and the book would maintain its

sense of chaos. Even if a translation into the dialect could not maintain every quality of the original, the same sacrifice is made when translating her work into English. Considering that an English version was her primary intention (Abouzeid Afterword 158), a departure from elements of the original is apparently not a problem for Abouzeid. Furthermore, aesthetic sacrifices are made in the process of any translation, but the value of broader dissemination of a work of literature outweighs this negative aspect.

As mentioned above, however, a translation into Moroccan Arabic would maintain most of the same aesthetic qualities. The primary differences would be the vocabulary, the element that would make Abouzeid's work more accessible to uneducated Moroccans, and the chaotic sense conveyed by the shifts between MSA and the dialect, which rendered her memoir nearly incomprehensible to readers such as Hamdawi.

Benefits of an Author-Performed Translation

Although Barbara Parmenter translated *Year of the Elephant* into English, Abouzeid assisted with the translation of *The Last Chapter* and performed the full translation of her memoir *Return to Childhood*. By performing or assisting with the translation, she permits herself to make adjustments to the content to better suit her new audience. Diya M. Abdo undertook the intensive and useful task of closely reading Abouzeid's memoir in both the Arabic and English versions. In doing so, Abdo discovered a number of differences that alter the way in which the story is received. Although editors and publishers likely encouraged certain changes, the specificity of the details added in the English version demonstrate Abouzeid's direct role in the changes.

As mentioned above, Abouzeid originally wrote with the Western audience in mind. She wrote the original version in Arabic to aid in expression, but an English translation was the only

version she had planned to publish. She saw the memoir as an “opportunity to correct certain misconceptions about Muslim women” (Abouzeid Afterword 158). The alterations to the English version contribute to this goal. Her devotion to Islam and the feasibility of reconciliation of her faith and gender equality is a theme conveyed in all of her works. Abdo notes, “Abouzeid is mindful of not being appropriated by the West and of not being seen as attacking Islam and thus providing the West with more ammunition” (Abdo 23). Abouzeid emphasizes the importance of her religion and demonstrates that such beliefs can coexist with her success and a desire for gender equality.

Abouzeid also addresses the practical matter that a Western audience would have less context for the events she narrates, so she adds more description and details of places and people (Abdo 26). Such descriptions would not only be unnecessary for a Moroccan audience, but they may also be seen as inappropriate based on the traditional expectations that women not discuss their private lives in the public sphere. Similarly, the English version presents itself more explicitly as an autobiography. The subtitle *Memoir of a Modern Moroccan Woman* emphasizes the genre (Abdo 10). The traditionally discouraged “I” is also exceptionally visible in the English version (Abdo 15).

The translation also makes changes that alter the ideological message. For example, men in the English version are more harsh and cruel. While in the Arabic version, a son’s response to his mother’s request for financial help is “I have nothing to give you,” in the English version he says, “Too bad” (Abdo 20). This ideological change colors the memoir to be received as a feminist text. In translating her work into colloquial Moroccan Arabic, Abouzeid could make similar changes to further reveal discrepancies in gender equality and mistreatment of women, therefore further inspiring the need for action and change.

In the English version of the memoir, the narrator serves as “the voice of the intellectual who allows these illiterate women to speak, whereas in the original text they seem to speak without aid from or framing by an authorial voice” (Abdo 30). Such an alteration communicates the illiteracy problem to a Western audience, promoting the need for change in Morocco. This type of change adds to Abouzeid’s ideological message, indicating her interest in spreading a viewpoint to a particular audience.

Based on Abouzeid’s willingness to alter the text in her translation to English to contribute to her ideological intentions, she would likely be willing to make similar changes when translating into Moroccan Arabic. Therefore, an author-performed translation of any of her works would allow her to include messages and instruction to the less educated audience. She would be able to tailor her books to fit her ideological goals for empowerment and improvement. She could use her judgment to decide how explicit such changes would be. Alternatively, she could maintain the original characteristics of her texts. Because she would be writing in her native language and the language of the oral literature she has heard, she would not need to rely on translators or editors who potentially make ideological alterations without her direct consent.

The Prevalence of the Berber Language in Morocco

While a translation into Moroccan Arabic would reach a greater portion of Morocco’s less educated population, the solution overlooks the predominance of Moroccans whose first language is actually Berber. According to Sadiqi, more than half of Moroccans learn Berber as their first language (Sadiqi *Women* 46). Therefore, writing in MSA effectively ignores Berbers - the original natives of Morocco. Pauline Homsy Vinson touches upon this problem when she notes that in Abouzeid’s memoir, she “tells us that her father’s mother was Berber, [but] she does

not directly address the question of the Berber language or cultural identity in Morocco” (Vinson 105). In this context, Vinson is referring to Abouzeid’s failure to present a complete and accurate portrayal of Moroccan society in her attempts to amend Western stereotypes. This failure can be taken a step further when one considers that many Berbers learn French in school instead of MSA. Therefore, not only is she leaving this native group out of her retelling of Moroccan society, but she also leaves these women without an opportunity to read her works by writing in a language they may not have the chance to learn.

The prevalence of Berbers learning French rather than Arabic emerged because of the divide-and-conquer tactics used during French colonialism. The French posited that Arabs and Berbers were genetically different and that Berbers were closer to being French than Arab. Assimilation policies targeted Berber populations, resulting in French becoming the predominant second language rather than Arabic. While today’s Berber youth are likely to learn Arabic, those who grew up during colonialism did not.

In *The Last Chapter*, the character of Salim represents a secularized Berber who received a French education. In response to Aicha suggesting that he keep a book of Arabic poetry on his bedside table to remind them “that there are other languages besides French,” Salim replies that “Arabic is not the language of the Berbers” (30-31). Abouzeid implies that his self-identification as a Berber rather than a Moroccan is the fault of his French education (Khannous 181). Based on this attitude, Abouzeid reveals her awareness that she could reach the Berber population of Morocco if she were to write in French but that she refuses to cater to the residual effects of French Colonialism. She also refuses to accommodate what she sees as a false Berber identity that she considers a direct result of colonialism. Regardless of her reasoning, she is still

overlooking a major portion of the Moroccan population, and furthermore the majority of the rural population, the group that would reap the most benefit from the messages in her writing.

Considering that a translation into Moroccan Arabic would be of little help to the Berber population, perhaps, as IRCAM² gets closer to standardizing the Berber language, a translation should be performed so that more of the rural population can read her work. Alternatively, some educated Berbers could read the works as they are translated into French, which they are more likely to understand.

Analysis of Abouzeid's Individual Texts

It is worthwhile to examine each of Abouzeid's texts in detail to establish the importance of making her work accessible to all Moroccans. Certain overarching themes prevail throughout all of her work. These include revealing the hypocrisy of the aftermath of independence from France, examining the country's struggles with language and literacy, demonstrating the necessity of unity among women, and reconciling tradition with modernity. All of these themes would be useful to Moroccans of every status, and most are worth conveying to foreign audiences as well. Therefore, a translation of Abouzeid's work into colloquial Moroccan Arabic as an addition to, rather than a replacement of, the existing versions in MSA, English, and the numerous other translations would allow for the essential task of wide dissemination of her work.

Year of the Elephant

Abouzeid's first novel, *Year of the Elephant*, is the most explicit in expressing the need for gender equality. The book is told from the perspective of Zahra, a woman who risked her life to help her husband in the fight for independence only to be repudiated shortly afterward for

² Institut Royale de la Culture Amazighe; IRCAM is an organization established by King Mohammed VI to preserve and promote Amazigh (Berber) language and culture.

being too traditional. Zahra returns to her home village, equipped only with the one hundred days worth of expenses the law requires her ex-husband to provide and the single room she had inherited from her father. She owns only those things that men have given her, so she sets out to find independence. Her primary source of refuge and assistance on her quest is the Sheikh at the mosque in her village. In addition to giving Zahra a place to stay while she waits for her tenant to move out of her room, the Sheikh provides spiritual guidance and helps her to discover her own sense of autonomy. It is while talking to him that she remembers she knows how to spin wool, a trade she had neglected while married and fighting for independence. Although her attempts to spin wool for a living are eventually unsuccessful, the act of participating in commerce and creating a product on her own gives her the strength to insist upon her independence and refuse the offer to live with her sister. Zahra ends up living in Casablanca and working as a maid at the French Cultural Center. The irony that she ends up relying on the French after fighting so hard to gain independence from France reveals the shortcomings of Moroccan men in terms of providing domestic freedoms after demanding national liberty.

In addition to the appeal of the overall story's theme that women can find independence through hard work and religious faith, specific moments in the book would be especially meaningful for a variety of audiences to read. In addition to revealing the gender inequities in Morocco by emphasizing repeatedly the meager one hundred days of expenses the law provides to Zahra, the novel includes Abouzeid's themes of exposing hypocrisy following national independence, the grave struggle against illiteracy, and the option of reconciling traditional faith with modern rights.

One of the overarching messages in *Year of the Elephant* is the hypocrisy of men who fought for national independence but refuse to grant women domestic independence. Before

their divorce, Zahra expresses frustration with her husband about the discrepancy between his ideals regarding independence from the French and his opinions about the rights of women within Morocco. She exclaims, “You don’t like me eating with my fingers? It doesn’t please you that I sit with the servants? We fought colonialism in their name, and now you think like the colonizers!” (64). The fact that her husband repudiates her in part because she is too traditional reveals conflicting requirements for women’s behavior. Although Zahra believes her husband wants a modern wife, he would likely divorce this type of woman as well for refusing to follow tradition and show subservience. He behaves hypocritically in his expectations for Zahra’s behavior and his unwillingness to grant her autonomy after she fought for the nation’s independence by his side. The behavior of Zahra’s husband serves as an allegory for the Moroccan government that expected women to participate in the movement for independence but now refuses to grant them basic domestic rights. This message is important for all Moroccans to receive, as it exposes hypocrisy that may be unrecognized because it has become a part of everyday life.

Zahra’s struggle against illiteracy echoes that of the 60% of illiterate Moroccan women. Although she does claim to have learned to read and write to more effectively fight against French colonialism, several moments reveal the severe limitations of Zahra’s literacy. In order to receive the one hundred days of expenses the law provides, Zahra must be at least minimally literate. She must be able to read and fill in the money order form in order to receive the meager amount she is promised. During this humiliating experience at the post office, she remembers with resentment that she “had learned to write in those evening classes where we battled illiteracy among those who could neither read nor write, but where the educated learned nothing” (26). This memory indicates the immense effort she had to put forth in order to learn to read.

She did not learn to read or write as a child, and must therefore attend night classes in order to do so. This fact speaks to the lack of educational infrastructure in Morocco. The comment about the educated learning nothing may refer to the lack of awareness and acknowledgment of the illiteracy problem among those who do not face the same struggle. Alternatively, she could be lamenting the lack of opportunity for those who already knew how to read and write but who wanted to learn more. For those women, these classes are probably the only ones available and therefore their potential for intellectual growth is limited. Either way, the novel illuminates the barriers to literacy facing Moroccan women.

Although her night classes enable Zahra to be sufficiently literate to fill out a money order form, other moments in the novel suggest the ineffectiveness of these classes. After her efforts to sell the wool she spun leave her with merely a few francs, she goes to the Sheikh to tell him she is leaving for Casablanca. He asks her what she plans to do considering she has no education. In response, she feels “an urge to mock, not him but [her]self,” and says, “I have a diploma from the literacy campaign, didn’t you know?” (62). This urge to mock herself about her literacy reveals the limitations of the classification. She is literate enough to receive a diploma from the literacy campaign and would likely qualify as literate for a census poll, but her own lack of faith in her education and the Sheikh’s belief that she has no education exposes the ineffectiveness of these classes.

Zahra exposes herself as illiterate at the end of the novel, after she has started making a living as a maid in Casablanca. In the final moment of the novel Zahra tells the Sheikh a story about seeing a magazine cover with a South African doctor and his new wife. Zahra learns that he had been married to his first wife for twenty-one years but divorced her after he became a famous heart surgeon. She also learns that the first wife wrote a book about how a woman’s life

can be completely altered when her husband's social status changes (80). The revealing aspect of this moment is that she asks about the magazine cover rather than reading the article herself. The magazine is most likely written in MSA, and therefore would be very difficult for her to read. The fact that she does not even attempt to read the article also speaks to her lack of confidence in her abilities.

Zahra's struggle with illiteracy would be illuminating to a variety of audiences. Her story would remind educated Moroccans of the difficulty and necessity of learning to read and write, especially if school was not a part of childhood. A foreign audience would better understand the need for educational improvements in Morocco, especially for women. Less educated or illiterate Moroccans would relate to Zahra's struggle and see her perseverance in the quest for independence in spite of her despondency about her lack of education. If the book were translated into Moroccan Arabic, a woman who is similarly quasi-literate could read the story and feel more accomplished than after simply filling out forms. This sense of accomplishment could provide the motivating factor to continue working toward full literacy. Additionally, a literate woman could feel more confident speaking out in favor of her rights in the public sphere. Reading Abouzeid's novel in colloquial Moroccan Arabic could be an important step toward public self-expression and participation in political movements that opposed gender inequities. Although a translation into the dialect could prove invaluable to less educated members of society, the book's role of raising awareness about the illiteracy problem is one that should reach both educated Moroccans and foreign audiences. Therefore, the original edition in MSA and the translations into other languages should remain.

Year of the Elephant also conveys the theme that women of all situations must unite in order to initiate change and improvement. In response to seeing the South African surgeon on

the magazine cover, Zahra remarks “How alike people are. And how I understood that woman! No one could understand her better than I. As if I were looking at myself, as if God creates many copies from one mold” (80). With this final moment, Abouzeid speaks to the importance of mutual understanding and compassion among women. Women in all circumstances can be subject to some level of gender discrimination, and women’s unity is an important step to rectifying such injustice. Again, a varied audience is ideal for such a message. If an educated or foreign woman reads this novel, she will hopefully feel connected to Zahra and might therefore work toward change that would benefit real women in similar circumstances. Similarly, if a quasi-literate woman in Zahra’s position reads the novel, she will see that the gender inequities she faces are not class-specific and that merely lamenting fate or hoping for individual improvement is not sufficient to change the problems that affect the entire country.

Another important element of *Year of the Elephant* that less educated women would identify with is the reconciliation between tradition and modernity, and the quest for women’s independence within the framework of Islam. As previously mentioned, Zahra is repudiated in part because she is too traditional and resists the modern French influence. She tells the Sheikh, “I’m nothing but an old coin fit only for the museum shelf. Their positions in society now call for modern women” (10). Although she expresses frustration with her traditional ways, she maintains this tradition along with her religious faith throughout the story. Rather than attempting to transform herself into a modern woman to try to win her husband back or find another man, she remains true to herself and her faith.

At the end of the novel when she has accepted her place as a maid for the French Cultural Center, she explains to the Sheikh what her reality is: “Work, faith, and other things that aren’t so important. The important thing is that I remember God and concentrate on this idea of mine

that we are only passing through this life to build a road to the next one” (80). Zahra deemphasizes the value of the current material world and focuses on the traditional idea of the afterlife. In doing so, she finds her own version of autonomy and independence. Although she is in a subservient position to the French as a maid, she is at peace because she maintained integrity and is living her own life. The fact that the Sheikh is her primary support in making a life for herself demonstrates the plausibility of finding female empowerment within Islam. Although the Family Code has interpreted the foundations of Islam to give men power over women, the Sheikh interprets Islam to be more about individual faith than anything else. He comforts Zahra by saying that this life is merely “temporary” whereas the afterlife is “truth itself” (11). Therefore, although elements of Islam have been misinterpreted in Morocco in this world, practicing Muslims believe the true principles of Islam remain intact in the afterlife.

Abouzeid’s work demonstrates that reconciliation of traditional faith in Islam and women’s equity and independence is possible. All Moroccans could find such an idea important. While elite members of society could read such an idea to indicate that they should reconsider laws and policies, lower class women could see that they can take control of their lives without abandoning their religious faith. Furthermore, if less educated men understand that gender inequality is not inherent in Islam, they might be more likely to accept and treat women as equals. A translation into colloquial Moroccan Arabic on top of the original MSA version would enable the majority of Moroccans to read *Year of the Elephant* and begin to understand how its themes relate to Moroccan society. While the exact reactions of readers are impossible to predict, exposure to an example of gender equity within a framework of Islam might encourage Moroccans of all classes to pursue reform.

Return to Childhood

Abouzeid's memoir is revolutionary in its form. Autobiography is largely disrespected in the Arab world, and women especially are discouraged from sharing their private lives with the public. If uneducated Moroccan women were to read this book and see Abouzeid sharing her story so publicly and defiantly, they might be inspired to speak out against inequities and tell the world their own stories. Therefore, it is important for Moroccans of all class levels to read this memoir and see the value of public self-expression.

Abouzeid's memoir is written as if it is an oral narrative. The book is divided into four chapters based on Abouzeid's four childhood homes. While the overall narrative moves chronologically, the numerous flashbacks and stories create a nonlinear plot. The primary storyline describes Abouzeid's childhood in relation to the fight for independence from the French and the sacrifices her family makes to support the nationalist movement. The book's narrator shifts from Abouzeid to her mother to her grandmother, with each new voice telling her perspective on events. These voice shifts are embedded in the text, so it is as if Abouzeid is re-telling her family's stories in an oral narrative to her audience.

The oral nature of her memoir would contribute to the goals of a translation into colloquial Moroccan Arabic. Considering the tradition of oral literature among Moroccan women, the style of the narrative would be well received and easy to follow by women who regularly hear stories told at home. Therefore, women would not only enjoy the familiarity of Abouzeid's memoir, but it would also be a good intermediate step for an illiterate Moroccan. In addition to the language that is heard at home, the narrative structure would make the book accessible for women who are quasi-literate or for those who are illiterate who can be taught the Arabic alphabet. While a Western reader unaccustomed to the genre of oral storytelling might

struggle to follow the plot due to the work's nonlinear nature, a Moroccan reader would find comfort in its oral quality.

In addition to the importance of the genre and structure of Abouzeid's memoir, key moments and themes would make a translation into colloquial Moroccan Arabic valuable so that a greater portion of Morocco's population could read her work. One subject that Abouzeid regularly returns to is education. Her mother's aunt voices a common conception regarding the futility of sending girls to school. She asks, "What will a girl study, for heaven's sake and what for? A girl's destiny is marriage, pregnancy and breast-feeding isn't it?" (36). This way of thinking contributes to the shocking 60% illiteracy rate among Moroccan women. Fortunately for Abouzeid, however, a major element of the nationalists' platform was to encourage women's education. Because of her father's role in the nationalist movement, Abouzeid's education was not an option. As described in her memoir, the young Abouzeid thoroughly enjoys school and reading, particularly in Arabic, so she feels compelled to work especially hard to do her best. It would be useful for a less educated woman to see Abouzeid as an example of what a woman with an education can accomplish.

The book makes several comments on traditional Moroccan pedagogy. Abouzeid notes that she was in school "to learn writing and reading and to memorize poems in Arabic and French" (43). This emphasis on memorization is the reason the woman whom Diaconoff interviewed is cited for her lack of interest in reading. Abouzeid reminisces that she "learned the principles of Arabic, as pure as water from a spring, from teachers who loved the language and believed that to instill its principles in us was a religious and national duty" (64). While her experience of learning Arabic is positive, the illiteracy rate and the woman whom Diaconoff interviewed suggest that this is the exception rather than the rule.

Abouzeid's memoir also contains evidence of the gender inequities in Morocco. Her grandmother tells the story of a "foolish" girl who was caught committing adultery. As punishment her "brother dragged her by the hair down the staircase and through the alleys, unveiled and without her underwear. When he got her home he started beating her with a rope" (57). The girl's father also kicks her out of the house and denounces her as his daughter. Such a response is clearly extreme, and the fact that the girl is considered "foolish" reveals the flaws in the traditional assignment of blame. The girl was actually seduced by the man in an effort to seek revenge on her husband, but the fault and punishment of adultery lies solely with the girl in this traditional way of thinking. If a Moroccan reader approaches this event critically, its injustice will become apparent and the necessity of shifting this attitude will be revealed. This shift in outlook is important for Moroccans at all class levels to undergo, so a translation into colloquial Moroccan Arabic on top of the original MSA version would be valuable. The genre, structure, and content of *Return to Childhood* all contribute to its potential value in translation.

The Last Chapter

Abouzeid's most recent work, *The Last Chapter*, conveys several of the same themes in a more modern context. The narrator of this story is Aisha, an intelligent woman who was lucky enough to get an education, although she was only one of two girls among a class of 42. The focus of the novel is her inability to find a successful relationship with a man, often because of her insistence on maintaining tradition in modern society. The other main themes of the novel are men's hypocrisy and the need for unity among women. The title points us to an essential piece of the novel – the final chapter. In this portion we get the perspective of Aisha's unnamed classmate who was the only other girl in her class. We learn that she is just as dissatisfied with

her life as Aisha, and that she envies Aisha's path. Although Aisha is unhappy in her inability to find a husband, her classmate is equally unhappy in her marriage. Therefore the novel's overall message is that dissatisfaction exists in women from all levels of society and there is a problem with the country's overall outlook to create such unhappiness regardless of marital status.

The men Aisha encounters throughout the story consistently disappoint her. Among these men is her father, who vetoed her decision to marry the man of her choice even though she has a university degree and a good job. Aisha complains:

The worst of it was that my father rated as an 'intellectual.' But believe me, while our male intellectuals love to expound their liberated views in panel discussions or newspaper editorials, in private they're no better than petty dictators. My father's word was as arbitrary as it was final. (51)

Aisha's father is like the men in power following independence who fought for national freedom but refused to grant women domestic freedom. While an education is important for a woman, an educated man will always trump an educated woman in Morocco. This type of hypocrisy may go unnoticed by those illiterate women who remain confined to the home. These women probably don't see these men's public displays of "liberated views," so the discrepancy between their public and private behavior goes unseen. If these women could obtain a sufficient level of literacy to read this book in colloquial Moroccan Arabic, however, they could see the problems with men's attitudes and work toward remedying their situation.

Another important theme of this novel is the idea that all women in Morocco are subject to the same inequities and therefore unity is essential to promoting change. At the beginning of the book, Aisha remembers a visit from her classmate, whose perspective we get in the final chapter. The classmate says to Aisha, "You read, you travel, you're growing. I do nothing. I've

got nothing to offer.” To this, Aisha responds, “I’m the one who’s supposed to be envying you...[for having] six children. God alone knows what any of them might accomplish some day” (21). This exchange reveals that the two women are mutually envious of one another and that the problem of gender inequity exists regardless of marital status. Although Aisha does not have a husband to limit her liberty, her father and society in general still impose injustice. She states, “My supposed freedom from illiteracy, unemployment, the veil, were a joke, an illusion. I still had a chain around my neck” (51). This statement reveals that getting an education is not enough to free a woman from the constraints of inequality. Both Aisha and her classmate are educated, but Moroccan society poses a barrier to grasping real freedom. Aisha notes that rivalry among women also prevents progress, stating, “If woman has an enemy, it’s other women” (59). She recognizes the likelihood that women can sabotage one another and further delay progress. The novel conveys the importance of women uniting and understanding that gender inequity is a national problem that cannot be solved by education alone. While literacy is an essential first step, it is insufficient without a willingness to unite in support of social change.

In light of the need for steps beyond literacy, a translation of this novel into colloquial Moroccan Arabic would promote the necessary change in women’s mindsets to achieve progress. As with Abouzeid’s memoir, the themes of *The Last Chapter* are not immediately apparent, so the reader must engage in critical thinking in order for the text to work as a feminist text. Encouraging this type of reading is important because less educated Moroccan women need to examine their own lives critically to reveal the social problems that exist below the surface and are not recognized as being problems because they have existed for so long. The fact that Abouzeid’s feminist messages are not explicit in *The Last Chapter* is useful as a means for

less educated women to practice critical reading of a text that is more accessible than those written in MSA.

Short Stories

In addition to Abouzeid's two novels and her memoir, she has written a number of short stories that cover similar themes. The genre of the short story could most effectively tap into the benefits of a translation into colloquial Moroccan Arabic because of its length and its ease of distribution. The short form would be more accessible to a reader with limited literacy and would provide an intermediate level before he or she attempts to read an entire novel. In terms of distribution, Abouzeid could publish her short stories in newspapers or magazines, particularly if another news source in colloquial Arabic like *Nichane* were to emerge. Her themes regarding the importance of gender equity could then reach a wide audience in an affordable format.

“Divorce”

Abouzeid's short story “Divorce” was included at the end of *Year of the Elephant* as an appendix among other stories. It describes a young man whose motorcycle accident reminds him of how unhappy he is with the state of his life. He is unhappy in his job and his marriage. He blames poverty for forcing him to leave school and enter an unfulfilling marriage, but he mostly blames his father for divorcing his mother and abandoning his family. He laments his situation to his brother, who believes that the young man's “bitterness is too intense” (100). He responds by reminiscing about how hard his mother worked to buy him a bicycle, but quickly remembers how quickly his happiness from the purchase faded. He says that children's happiness “can be destroyed by a number of things, one of which is divorce” and that the trauma of this kind of abandonment “marks children with psychological scars that never fade” (101). The next scene describes the young man chastising his wife for inadequately ironing his shirt collar and

throwing the shirt in her face in front of their children. His wife responds indignantly and claims that were it not for their children she would rather be someone's maid. As he storms out, she mockingly adds that he wants to keep up the "family tradition" of throwing their children out on the streets. This comment from his wife is the last straw for the young man, who heads straight for the *adil*'s³ office to request a divorce. The story ends with the man giving the *adil* his and his wife's name, the date of place of their marriage, and a fifty-*dirham* bill, which is the equivalent of around six dollars. After this simple process, the reader is left to consider how quickly and easily this young man followed in his father's footsteps and carried about the same behavior that he blamed for his own misfortune.

This story provides a short vignette in which readers see the gender inequities in Morocco along with the hypocrisy of men. The injustice of men's full control over divorce is clear when the young man can impulsively get a divorce for such a low sum of money without even telling his wife. He only says as he leaves, "You'll hear from me!" (102). Presumably she will receive a sum comparable to Zahra's one hundred days of expenses, except that such an amount will be even more meager considering the fact that she has children to provide for. We also see the young man's hypocrisy when he blames all his problems on his parent's divorce, but then proceeds to impose the same fate on his own children. Just as in *Year of the Elephant*, this hypocrisy serves as an allegory for the Moroccan government's attitude toward women following the fight for independence. Just as the man in "Divorce" is willing to impose the same pain he experienced on his children, the Moroccan government denies women's independence and equity following a fight against the same treatment the nation from the French. "Divorce"

³ The *adil* represents Islamic legal authority, who, prior to the 2004 reforms to the Family Code officiated at marriages and divorces.

portrays two of Abouzeid's most important themes in a form that is accessible and easy to distribute.

“A Notion of Progress”

The short story “A Notion of Progress” is included in the collection of short stories titled *The Director and Other Stories from Morocco*. The story begins with a conversation between the narrator and a Western woman named Catherine. Catherine asks the narrator if she thinks Morocco has progressed and how. The narrator responds that progress is measured by infrastructure such as paved roads, and in this way she believes Morocco has progressed compared to other African countries. Catherine, on the other hand, believes that computers are signs of progress. The narrator concedes that computers are important, but mentions that the problems with education and “overwhelming” illiteracy counteract this progress. She goes on to defend her initial statement that Morocco has progressed by emphasizing the comparison with the past and with other countries. The narrator gives the example of the post office ten years ago as evidence of Morocco's development. This conversation reminds her of a short entry she had written in her journal 1989 about the post office, and includes the excerpt in the story.

The entry details the disorganized and chaotic post office. She defends the patrons who are not lined up orderly by claiming, “This is not because the people don't understand the concept of order, but because the place is so small there is not room for a straight line to form” (82). At the same time, however, she blames the woman working there for being “extremely slow” (82). This simultaneous defense and accusation of her fellow Moroccans creates an interesting impression of Moroccans' relationships with one another. Although she blames the French who built the post office for the size and layout, she blames the Moroccan employee for the speed of the line.

The other important elements of this entry are the shifts between French and Arabic. The narrator had noted when patrons would shift between the two languages. For example, the final paragraph of the narrator's piece is written as follows: "The first man replied again in French that the telephone is part of business, and the post office supervisor should have supplied two employees. Then, shifting to Arabic, he said, 'We want to give them money but they won't take it.'" (84). These shifts in language within a short period of time by the same speaker indicate the complexities of language in Morocco. It is interesting to note that he gives a recommendation for improvement in French but a comment of cynicism in Arabic. It is also important to note that throughout the entry, patrons communicate with one another in both languages without translating. Therefore, the vignette is describing a group of very educated Moroccans.

Abouzeid's short story also subtly comments on language and readership. The narrator reflects on her journal and states "that those who write journals will have themselves as readers in the future and that a writer has to have a reader or he will not exist" (82). The idea that writers do not exist without readers contributes to the rationale for translating Abouzeid's work into colloquial Moroccan Arabic. By broadening her potential audience, she would be ensuring her survival as an author. The narrator touches on the problems with language barriers at the end of the story by noting that Catherine would have an answer to her question about whether or not Morocco has made progress "if only [she] could read Arabic" (84), because she would be able to read the narrator's journal entry. Together with her previous comment about writers needing readers in order to exist, the story makes a case for translation into as many languages as possible. Considering the large number of uneducated Moroccans, colloquial Moroccan Arabic should be at the top of this list of languages.

In addition to issues of language, the story subtly brings up a number of other issues in Moroccan society. The narrator claims, “infrastructure is the sign of real progress, not abortion rights” (81). This idea speaks to the tendency of advocates for development to equate women’s rights with progress. It is interesting to see this statement in light of Abouzeid’s other feminist ideas and commentary. Although an apparent contradiction, this perspective could be interpreted to indicate that some Moroccan women do not see the problem with lacking certain rights. The focus on abortion rights specifically may also indicate the emphasis on traditional values that some Moroccan women hold.

Another subtle indication of women’s status in Morocco occurs when Catherine mentions that she wanted to talk to a man on a train because he was using a laptop computer. She decided against doing so because she “was afraid he might think [she] was trying to seduce him” (81). The narrator responds immediately, “That’s what he would have thought” (81). It is telling that within a conversation about Morocco’s progress, the assumption that a woman speaking to a man in public is trying to seduce him is not challenged. The expectation that women remain silent in the public sphere is considered unproblematic and a part of life that must be accepted. Accepting such a notion creates problems with the idea that real progress has actually been made in Morocco. Even in light of infrastructure, illiteracy and embedded gender inequities prevent Morocco from making progress in the framework of Western modernity.

Although this story seems to be intended for a Western audience, Moroccan readers could benefit from the opportunity to objectively consider the country’s progress according to a variety of criteria. Although the narrator seems to think that improvements in the post office provide sufficient evidence for Morocco’s progress, a critical reading of the subtle comments about the status of women and education suggests there is room for improvement. The fact that 60% of

Moroccan women cannot read the story as it is written in MSA proves the necessity of improvement.

Conclusion

Wide dissemination of Abouzeid's work would be valuable for promoting social change in Morocco. The colloquial translation would be the effective in enacting social improvement, but this development would not be a result of the work's content alone. While the thematic and ideological components of her work are important to convey, especially to those less educated women who would benefit most from Abouzeid's ideas, the most significant result of a translation into colloquial Moroccan Arabic would be combatting illiteracy among Moroccan women. In order to create change for themselves and to be active participants in society, women need to be literate. Therefore, Abouzeid's work in translation could help women help themselves by motivating them to learn to read and providing an accessible form of literature. Additionally, these translations would be revolutionary to the Arab literary tradition. If other authors in the Arab world begin to publish their work in the colloquial dialects, the illiteracy gap might be narrowed because adults with limited education would have access to literature written in the language of everyday life rather than the formal MSA. If a respected author such as Abouzeid were to initiate this literary strategy, similar practices can continue to be used to rectify the illiteracy problem not only in Morocco, but throughout the Arab world.

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